

# Ratings of ‘threat’ and ‘intent’ by listeners exposed to neutrally-worded utterances in five languages

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Research on indirect threats – speech acts also interpretable as, say, warnings, advice or neutral statements of fact/opinion, e.g. *I wouldn't go talking to the police*, or *It'd be a shame if something were to happen to your kids* – has tended to focus on the linguistic content and the context-dependency of such utterances, and the extent to which readers/hearers interpret them as threats on the basis of these two factors (Fraser, 1998, Gales, 2012). Legally speaking, a threat only becomes one when it is treated as such by an observer who, on the basis of spoken or written words, forms beliefs about the intention and the capacity of the person delivering the threat to cause harm to the recipient and/or to a third party. The UK Public Order Act (1986, Ch. 64/4.1) specifies that use of threatening words is an offence if the hearer thereby has reason to believe that the speaker intends to perform an act that would be harmful to the hearer or to other individual(s).

We report an experiment seeking to elicit listeners' subjective ratings of neutrally-worded utterances designed to convey threat, and identically-worded ones which were not. The sentence *I know where you live* was read aloud by 8 adult male British English speakers, in 4 conditions, A-D. In condition A, speakers read the sentence, presented in isolation with no prompting of any sort, using a ‘normal’ tone of voice. In the ‘induced-threat’ condition B, speakers were asked to read the sentence in a ‘threatening’ way, where this was to be interpreted as they liked. In condition C, speakers read a short script incorporating the target sentence. The wording made it clear that the text was meant to be read in a non-threatening manner. Finally, condition D (‘induced-threat’) was also scripted, but on this occasion the message was clearly intended to encode an attempt to intimidate the recipient. The target sentence was then extracted from the C and D recordings, to remove contextual cues.

So as to test whether the wording itself was perceived to contribute to the perception of threat, the test sentence and accompanying scripts were translated into 4 other languages (Arabic, Swedish, Hebrew, Norwegian), and read aloud by native speakers of those languages. A panel of native English-speaking listeners (N=30), screened for knowledge of any of the foreign languages, were asked to rate the randomised English and foreign-language sentences for perceived threat level and for ‘intent to harm’. We predicted that these parameters would be closely correlated, but – there being such things as ‘empty threats’ – we thought it important to elicit judgements about both separately.

Listeners could distinguish induced-threat utterances from neutral ones, but did so more consistently for the English utterances than they did for the foreign-language ones. An understanding of the linguistic content of the utterance clearly allows listeners more readily to interpret (simulated) indirect threats as such; on its own, ‘tone of voice’ appears to have a relatively minor effect, albeit a potentially pivotal one. We conclude by outlining a planned series of experiments that will give us further insights into this hitherto unexplored area of

forensic speech science.

## References

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